Al-Balādhurī and the Conquest of Sindh

Al-Balādhurī's Account of the Conquest of Sindh

Al-Balādhurī's account of the conquest of Sindh is one of the earliest and most influential Arabic narratives of the Muslim expansion into the Indian subcontinent. His discussion appears primarily in *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān*, a ninth-century compilation of Islamic conquests stretching from Arabia and North Africa to Iran and Sindh.

Unlike later chronicles that emphasize dramatic military victories, Al-Balādhurī presents the conquest as a combination of military action, political negotiation, and administrative integration. His narrative reflects the concerns of the Abbasid period, particularly the establishment of stable governance and fiscal administration.

Early Arab Expeditions

Al-Balādhurī begins by describing Arab expeditions that preceded the famous campaign of Muḥammad ibn Qāsim.

Among these is a naval expedition against Tana (near present-day Mumbai), led by ʿUthmān ibn Abī al-ʿĀṣ al-Thaqafī during the caliphate of ʿUmar. According to Al-Balādhurī, Caliph ʿUmar disapproved of the expedition, remarking:

> "You have put a worm upon a piece of wood."

Although the exact meaning of this statement remains debated, it reflects the caliph's concern about the risks of naval warfare.

These early expeditions demonstrate that the Arab caliphate had strategic and commercial interests in Sindh decades before its formal conquest.

The Campaign of Muḥammad ibn Qāsim

Al-Balādhurī describes Muḥammad ibn Qāsim's campaign as a carefully organized military and administrative enterprise. His narrative includes:

- the march through Makran into Sindh,
- battles against Raja Dāhir,
- the capture of major cities such as Debal, Rawar, and Multan,
- treaties concluded with local rulers,
- taxation arrangements, and

- guarantees of protection for local populations.

Rather than focusing on dramatic battlefield episodes, Al-Balādhurī emphasizes how conquered territories were incorporated into the Umayyad state's fiscal and administrative system.

Sindh in the Indian Ocean World

Modern historians note that Al-Balādhurī's account reflects Sindh's long-standing integration into Indian Ocean trade networks.

Long before the conquest, Arab merchants traded regularly with Sindhi ports. Consequently, the conquest should not be understood as the first encounter between Arabs and Sindh, but as the culmination of decades of commercial and political interaction.

Why Al-Balādhurī's Account Matters

1. One of the Earliest Arabic Sources

Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān remains one of the principal Arabic sources for the early Muslim expansion into Sindh and continues to be indispensable for historians of early Islam.

2. An Abbasid Perspective

Writing under Abbasid patronage, Al-Balādhurī portrays the early conquests as orderly, legitimate, and administratively successful. His narrative reflects Abbasid political ideals, emphasizing governance, justice, taxation, and political stability.

3. Influence on Later Historiography

For centuries, historians—including many colonial scholars—treated Al-Balādhurī's narrative as a straightforward historical record.

Contemporary scholarship, however, argues that his work should be read critically alongside other sources such as the *Chachnāmah*. Rather than describing a single decisive conquest, modern historians increasingly view the incorporation of Sindh into the Islamic world as a gradual historical process.

Why Did Al-Ḥajjāj Send Troops to Sindh?

The famous expedition of Muḥammad ibn Qāsim was ordered by Al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf, the powerful Umayyad governor of Iraq. While traditional accounts emphasize the piracy incident near Daybul, modern historians argue that several political, economic, and strategic factors motivated the campaign.

1. The Piracy Incident

According to Arabic and later Indo-Persian sources, ships carrying Muslim women, children, and merchants from Sri Lanka were attacked by pirates near Daybul.

Al-Ḥajjāj demanded that Raja Dāhir punish those responsible and compensate the victims. Dāhir reportedly replied that the pirates were beyond his authority.

This refusal became the immediate justification for military intervention.

Although the incident appears in early Arabic sources, later works such as the *Chachnāmah* greatly expand and dramatize the story.

2. Securing Indian Ocean Trade

Sindh occupied a strategic position within the Indian Ocean commercial network.

Arab merchants had traded with Sindh for decades, and piracy threatened both commerce and state revenues. As governor of Iraq, Al-Ḥajjāj had a strong interest in protecting maritime trade and ensuring secure commercial routes.

3. Expanding Umayyad Authority

The campaign also formed part of the broader Umayyad policy of territorial expansion.

By incorporating Sindh, the Umayyad state sought to:

- extend its eastern frontier,
- control important ports,
- secure tax revenues, and
- establish a stable frontier beyond Makran.

The expedition was therefore far more than a punitive raid; it was an exercise in state-building.

4. Al-Ḥajjāj's Political Ambitions

Al-Ḥajjāj was renowned for his administrative ability and unwavering loyalty to the Umayyad caliphate.

A successful conquest strengthened both his personal standing and the prestige of the Umayyad government. Appointing the young Muḥammad ibn Qāsim as commander also demonstrated Al-Ḥajjāj's confidence in his military leadership.

Modern Scholarship on the Conquest of Sindh

Recent historians have substantially reinterpreted the conquest of Sindh. Three major conclusions have emerged.

1. The Piracy Incident Was Probably a Political Pretext

The *Chachnāmah* provides the most elaborate version of the piracy story, complete with speeches, letters, and emotional appeals.

Modern scholars—including Manan Ahmed Asif, Derryl MacLean, and F. A. Khan—argue that this dramatic narrative is largely absent from the earliest Arabic sources.

Al-Balādhurī mentions the incident only briefly, suggesting that later authors expanded it into a moral justification for conquest.

Many historians therefore regard the piracy episode as a political pretext rather than the principal cause of the invasion.

2. Arab Involvement in Sindh Long Predated the Conquest

Both Al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī describe Arab naval expeditions and commercial activity decades before Muḥammad ibn Qāsim's campaign.

The *Chachnāmah* itself depicts:

- Arab merchants living in Sindh,
- commercial disputes,
- multilingual communities,
- Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim traders,
- and extensive maritime trade.

These accounts indicate that Arabs and Sindhis had interacted for many years before 711 CE.

3. The Conquest Was a Gradual Process

Modern historians increasingly reject the notion of a single, decisive conquest.

Instead, they argue that Arab rule developed gradually through:

- military campaigns,
- negotiated treaties,
- local alliances,
- administrative integration,
- commercial cooperation,
- and cultural exchange.

The *Chachnāmah* itself devotes considerable attention to treaties, taxation, local administration, and the continued participation of indigenous elites.

Similarly, archaeological evidence reveals no widespread destruction dating to 711 CE. Hindu and Buddhist institutions continued to function after the conquest, suggesting continuity rather than wholesale disruption.

Conclusion

Modern scholarship presents the conquest of Sindh as a complex historical process rather than a simple military invasion. Strategic interests, economic considerations, diplomacy, and local political negotiations all played essential roles.

When read critically alongside the *Chachnāmah*, Al-Balādhurī's *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān* offers invaluable insight into how early Islamic historians understood the incorporation of Sindh into the expanding Muslim world. Together, these sources reveal that the conquest was not merely an episode of warfare but the beginning of a long period of political, economic, and cultural interaction between the Islamic caliphate and the Indian subcontinent.

History of the Prophets and Kings (***Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk***) provides a fuller and more dramatic account of the conquest of Sindh than Kitab Futuh al-Buldan, although it is still considerably shorter than the later Chachnama. His narrative focuses primarily on the correspondence between Al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf and Muhammad ibn Qasim and presents the conquest as a campaign directed from the center of the Umayyad state.

Here are the main features of al-Ṭabarī's account.

1. The Piracy Incident

Like al-Balādhurī, al-Ṭabarī begins with the attack on ships carrying Muslim passengers from Sri Lanka (Sarandīb). These ships allegedly contained Muslim women, children, merchants, and gifts intended for the Umayyad caliph.

When the ships were attacked near Daybul, the captives reportedly cried out:

> "O Ḥajjāj! O Ḥajjāj!"

This emotional detail is absent from al-Balādhurī but becomes an important element in al-Ṭabarī's narrative.

Al-Ḥajjāj demanded that Raja Dāhir punish the pirates and recover the captives. Dāhir replied that the pirates were outside his authority.

Al-Ṭabarī presents this refusal as the immediate justification for military action.

2. Earlier Expeditions

Before dispatching Muḥammad ibn Qāsim, al-Ṭabarī records that al-Ḥajjāj sent earlier commanders against Sindh.

These expeditions failed, increasing al-Ḥajjāj's determination to send a larger and better-prepared force under the young Muḥammad ibn Qāsim.

3. Al-Ḥajjāj's Detailed Supervision

One distinctive feature of al-Ṭabarī's narrative is the extensive correspondence between al-Ḥajjāj and Muḥammad ibn Qāsim.

Al-Ḥajjāj appears not merely as the governor who initiated the campaign but as its strategic director.

His letters contain instructions concerning:

- military tactics,
- siege operations,
- treatment of conquered cities,
- collection of taxes,
- distribution of booty, and
- reporting victories to Damascus.

This correspondence portrays the conquest as a centrally managed imperial enterprise.

4. The Siege of Daybul

Al-Ṭabarī recounts the siege of Daybul in considerable detail.

A notable episode concerns the great temple or fortress bearing a large banner. According to the narrative, local informants advised Muḥammad ibn Qāsim that the city's morale depended upon this banner. Once it was brought down by siege engines, resistance collapsed and the city fell.

This story later became highly influential in Islamic and Indo-Persian historiography.

5. Conquest and Administration

After the major victories, al-Ṭabarī shifts from military events to administration.

He records that:

- local rulers who submitted were often confirmed in office,
- agreements were concluded with many communities,
- taxation was organized,
- and non-Muslim populations were generally allowed to continue practicing their religion in return for payment of tribute.

These administrative measures resemble those emphasized by al-Balādhurī.

6. The Recall and Death of Muḥammad ibn Qāsim

Unlike al-Balādhurī, al-Ṭabarī includes the dramatic aftermath of the conquest.

After the accession of the Umayyad caliph Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik, Muḥammad ibn Qāsim was recalled because of his close association with al-Ḥajjāj, who had recently died.

Al-Ṭabarī reports that Muḥammad ibn Qāsim was arrested, imprisoned, and died in captivity.

He does **not** include the famous legend found in the *Chachnāmah* in which Raja Dāhir's daughters accuse Muḥammad ibn Qāsim before the caliph, leading to his execution. Modern historians generally regard that story as a later literary embellishment rather than an authentic historical account.